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ABSTRACT

Aliteracy, the ability to read but the unwillingness to do so, is a growing problem in American society. Aliteracy crosses all socioeconomic levels, thereby allowing autocratic, charismatic leaders to influence thinking and decision-making. Social changes that have contributed to the problem of aliteracy include the influence of television on reading motivation and comprehension, the changing structure of American families, and state minimum competency legislation. A look at reading instruction in other countries, specifically Greece and New Zealand, can shed some light on possible solutions to the problem of aliteracy. These include deemphasis on the basal reading system, fill-in-the-blank workbooks, and teaching for competency tests. Reading must also be made relevant for students, by demonstrating to children that the reason for learning to read is so they can read and learn independently and enjoy the process. Modeling reading behaviors can work in the teacher education classroom as well as in the elementary or secondary classroom. Communicating ideas in writing is the vital connection between learning to read and becoming an avid reader: language arts methods courses must provide preservice teachers with writing confidence so that they can model positive writing behaviors in the classroom and teach writing processes more effectively. (HTH)

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Aliteracy: What Teachers Can Do to Keep Johnny Reading

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ABSTRACT

Aliteracy, a term describing people who can read but choose not to, is a growing problem in American society. This disinclination to read is resulting in people who are allowing others to do their thinking and decision-making for them rather than read for information themselves. The demand for a back-to-basics curriculum, legislation requiring minimum competency testing, and other societal changes are explored as causes of aliteracy. This article also discusses some strategies for both college methods teachers and classroom teachers to employ to prevent aliteracy.

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INTRODUCTION

There are twenty-five million illiterate people in this country who cannot read newspapers, warning signs, directions, or labels on prescription drugs. There are another thirty-five million marginal illiterates who can read only haltingly and laboriously when they are required to fill out forms or read street signs (Kozol, 1985). Employers are justifiably alarmed to find that there are high school graduates who do not read or speak English sufficiently to work even in a fast food establishment.

The public has become much more aware of this problem in the past two years because it has become such a political issue. In an attempt to pass laws that demand "functional literacy," legislatures across the nation seem to be competing with each other to see which one can impose the highest standards the quickest.

The general public thinks of functional literacy as Gray defined it thirty years ago. He described a person as functionally literate "when he has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is assumed by his culture or group." (Harris and Hodges, 1981) But just what is assumed by our culture to be a literate person? We tend to define people as literate if they can read and write well enough to fill out forms, read the newspaper, or follow written directions. If they have minimum reading skills, we label them literate. Postman (1973) calls this letteracy not literacy and makes the analogy that "literacy is to reading what mathematics is to counting."

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A more accurate definition of literacy comes from the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The NAEP defines literacy as "using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (Micklos, 1985).

The key word here is "using." The disinclination to use reading and writing skills is resulting in a virtually unrecognized but insidious problem in this country known as aliteracy--the ability to read but the unwillingness to do so. There are many people who have learned these skills but have used them so seldomly that they have never become proficient readers. People who have the skills necessary for reading but read very little, eventually become poor readers. Finding reading a chore, they read less and less so the effect becomes cyclic (Wilson, 1981).

SOCIETAL PROBLEM

Aliteracy is a major problem in society. The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research televised a five hour conference on public television last year which addressed the question of aliteracy as a threat to our decision-making process. According to the participants in this conference, noted researchers and commentators in the field of reading, as well as editors of newspapers and magazines, aliteracy has already replaced illiteracy as the major threat to our society, and it is reaching epidemic proportions. Furthermore, aliteracy crosses all socioeconomic and educational boundaries.

While illiteracy tends to be a problem predominately of the lower class, aliteracy impacts all socioeconomic levels, thereby allowing autocratic,

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charismatic leaders to influence thinking and, consequently, the decision making. It is vital to a thriving democracy that its citizens read and think critically so that they are able to make independent decisions and act upon them in the workplace and in the voting booth.

The term, "decision-making", by its very definition, implies alternatives. This requires getting information from a variety of sources. Choice requires that there be more than one alternative to consider. Consequently, as a voting citizen in this country, one must have more than one source of information from which to make a choice or there is no decision-making occurring. An aliterate person is inclined to make decisions based on media input alone.

CAUSES OF ALITERACY

Many changes in our society have contributed to the phenomenon of aliteracy. There is a lot more to read than there was in our grandparents day. In just two decades, we have moved from an industrial society to an information society. (Naishitt, 1982) Every year between 200 and 300 new magazine start up (Jacobs, 1985) and 6,000 to 7,000 scientific articles are written each day (Naishitt, 1982). Americans are inundated daily by information from a vast array of sources including radio, video cassettes, newspapers, news letters, special interest bulletins, etc.

According to a study commissioned by the Book Industry Study Group, 96% of American adults read books, magazines, or newspapers, but there is a definite decline in the percentage of young readers (Lehr, 1983). Television has a negative influence on reading comprehension, especially for disadvantaged children (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1981). To be a good

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reader, an efficient processor of printed information, exposure to the printed word must occur often in order to reinforce reading and writing vocabularies which, in turn, influence reading comprehension (Wilson, 1981).

Vocabulary development is narrowing, not growing due to the lack of exposure and broad use of the words learned in school. Children are exposed to many new words in all subject areas in school but unless these words are encountered in print and enlarged in meaning through use, they are soon forgotten. Television programming tends to contribute to vocabulary stagnation, not growth (Lieberman's 1983).

Another major change that has contributed to the problem of aliteracy is the changing structure of the American family . There are many one parent families or mixed families consisting of "his," " hers," and "our" children. More than half of the women in the United states have joined the work force in an effort to maintain or improve their family's life style (Green and Epstein, 1985). Consequently, parents are not as accessible as they once were to help with homework, model good reading habits, or monitor their children's studies. As a result, many more children are left unsupervised before and after school often with television as their entertainment and babysitter, thus, establishing a lifetime habit.

A third contributing factor to the problem of aliteracy are the "solutions" being imposed by 78% of the state legislatures in the United States to the decline in achievement test scores (Plieko and Stern, 1984). Thirty nine states require tests to prove that students are learning minimum skills before they are promoted to the next grade. This places teachers and students under enormous

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pressure to insure that children can pass these tests (Wilson, 1981). Reading instruction with the goal of producing people who can pass minimum skills tests to prove that they can read will not necessarily produce a literate individual at the end of twelve years of schooling or one who will continue to read once out of school.

If children's reading instruction comes exclusively from a vocabulary controlled reader, ditto sheet skill drills, and workbooks, then students are not likely to learn that reading can be pleasurable and exciting. If children are tested on their knowledge of discrete skills instead of their ability to comprehend what they read, then they will be taught these skills in isolation, "reducing the amount of time available for direct reading instruction" (Manning, 1985). Furthermore, overemphasis on teaching decoding and structural analysis skills in order to pass a state mandated skills test requires that instructional time be spent teaching the student test taking skills as well. (Wilson, 1981) Consequently, the joy of reading is never discovered for there is no time left for the reading activities that lead to true literacy.

While it is certainly true that schools should be held accountable for teaching children the basic skills necessary for every individual to be a productive, contributing members of society, they should also produce students who can think independently, be critical decision-makers, and simply enjoy reading for pleasure. Insistence upon testing minimum skills instead of stressing overall comprehension and critical thinking is a major contributor to aliteracy for it "hardens the erroneous assumption that reading is indeed a separate school subject, and (skills testing) contributes little, if anything, to the

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development of pupil reading proficiency" (Manning, 1983).

READING INSTRUCTION IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Examining reading instructional practices in other countries can shed some light on possible solutions to the serious problem of aliteracy that faces our society. Greek children learn to read with few, if any failures. They begin with the teacher and class talking about their experiences and talking about pictures in books. Then they begin to write. They record everything they are learning in their notebooks which generally entails reading and writing two hours in school and doing one hour of homework per day. In other words, they learn to read and write through a language experience approach (Mavrogenes, 1983).

New Zealand's students surpassed students from all other countries in reading comprehension and volume of material read according to an international study (Guthrie, 1981). Further investigations revealed that New Zealanders take a psycholinguistic view of reading, and at no time are sounds taught in isolation. A whole-language approach is used which includes the use of language experience, trade books, and basal readers. However, there is no "push-pull" from textbook companies and little use of commercially prepared workbooks. Instructional decision-making is still in the hands of the schools (Smit, 1983).

Reading has a high priority in the New Zealander's home. Libraries are crowded with long check-out lines. Teachers expect parents to take their children to the library once a week and they do (Smit, 1983). Guthrie (1983) was continually struck by the abundance of attractive books in the classroom noting

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that they "gathered no dust but were read, reread, exchanged, and adored." He also noted the "near absence of tests," yet New Zealand students surpassed the United States in both achievement and volume of reading (Guthrie, 1981, 1983)

PREVENTING ALITERACY

Unlike the patterns seen in the schools of New Zealand and Greece, most schools in the United States teach beginning reading with the basal reader system. Most of what children write is in the form of filling in the blank on a ditto sheet or in a workbook. Additionally, there is a growing emphasis on testing in such a way that children stand little chance of scoring well unless the basal materials are followed closely and exclusively.

Make Reading Relevant

Rather than read about reading, teachers themselves must experience success and pleasure in reading and convey this to their students. Unfortunately, many teachers are also found in the aliterate society, and as a result, they can not teach a love for reading because it is something that they have not experienced. In order to convince students of the value of being a good reader, teachers must make reading relevant to their students by constantly integrating the reading of books, magazine, newspapers, etc. into their curriculum.

Another way of making reading more relevant to students is by exposing them to the process of gathering information from a variety of sources rather than from the exclusive use of one textbook. In this way they will learn to draw logical conclusions based on more than one information source, thereby setting up a pattern for future decision making.

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School libraries abound with well written information books that convey concepts studied in the content areas much more clearly and in a more interesting manner than a textbook. Current magazines and newspapers make science, history, and geography lessons far more interesting and relevant than any textbook ever written and should at least be considered important supplements to the text which provides the structure for the topic being studied.

With a little planning, even phonics and structural analysis can be taught and reinforced through the use of trade books enabling children to enjoy reading and improve their skill at the same time. There are many good children's books that illustrate rhyming patterns and allow for auditory discrimination of sounds and recognition of word families. For example, Some of Shel Silverstein's (1981) poems provide a delightful way for students to practice recognizing and using the "-tion" suffix. There are other poems in his collection which have the repeated use of the "-sh" digraph at the end of the word or lots of repetitions of delicious words that just roll off a tongue. These activities are so much more motivating and relevant to a child than page after page of dittos or workbook pages. Teachers can plan lessons using trade books and share those plans with other teachers, thus cutting down on the additional time required to do this kind of teaching.

The goal of making reading relevant is to demonstrate to children that the reason for to read is so they can read and learn independently and enjoy the process. The value of reading all kinds of books and articles will be conveyed to students if the teacher is an avid reader. Teachers who enthusiastically share information acquired from various kinds of reading are conveying an important

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message in a powerful way to students. They are saying that there is something to get excited about in reading! They are demonstrating that a lot of things can be learned from reading and problems can be solved by reading about how others solved their problems.

Another message is that reading can help us get in touch with how we feel about something when we read how someone else has put it into words. All of these insights can be transmitted very effectively in a natural way by teachers who love to read and tell their students about what they are reading.

Modeling in the College Classroom

Just as in an elementary or secondary classroom, such approaches work in the college classroom as well. For example, a provocative editorial shared in class by the college methods teacher can accomplish several goals. First, it makes the topic under discussion relative to the real world; and, second, it models the kind of behavior deemed desirable in these future classroom teachers.

Such observations come from my own experience. Recently while discussing the differences in dialect and their impact in our society in a language arts methods course, I read a syndicated newspaper column about the humiliation of O. J. Simpson's being replaced as a sports commentator for the Superbowl because of his nonstandard oral language (Rowen, 1985). That piece of journalism was used to illustrate a point to these future language arts teachers. In doing so I was able to vividly impress the students with the potential handicap speakers of black English face, no matter how successful they may be, if they do not learn standard oral language skills. Students voluntarily began to report in subsequent classes on the controversy being reported in the newspapers

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surrounding O. J. One student remarked that she had never even read the sports page in the paper before but was intrigued by being able to follow up on the story and see how it turned out. While motivating my students to read the sports page was not my goal, the unspoken message was that I value reading the editorial page in the newspaper.

The Reading /Writing Connection

A vital connection in the transition from learning to read to becoming an avid reader lies in learning how to effectively communicate ideas in writing. Graves (1983) calls this "balancing the basics." An appreciation of reading will be acquired by people who can write, and they will get more meaning from what they read if they have learned how to express well their own thoughts in writing. While teachers do not have to be expert writers in order to teach children how to write, they must be actively involved in writing. Many teachers feel inadequately prepared to teach children how to write because they are not confident writers themselves so they teach writing as they were taught and perpetuate the inadequacy (Graves, 1985).

Breaking the Cycle

In order to break this cycle, language arts methods courses must provide preservice teachers with the opportunity to become confident in their own ability to write and to teach children to write. This can be done effectively if college instructors will model the teaching behaviors that foster creative and intelligent thinkers and writers. Preservice teachers writing in class with the instructor modeling how to assist in topic selection, how to respond to what their student has written, how to conduct effective writing conferences, and how to

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promote self-editing will provide future teachers with an example of how to work with students of their own.

Even college students learn best what they actually practice doing with guidance from the instructor. Their past experience has probably consisted of writing papers without assistance from a teacher and later being the passive recipient of returned papers that have been edited and graded for them. They need to experience the process an effective teacher uses to build self-confidence in a budding author by being on the receiving end of gentle questioning and experiencing the new avenues of thinking that the teacher's probing reveals in the writing conference.

Children come to school thinking that they can write. They have already been making sense for themselves and others (if asked) out of their scribbles and letters that they have drawn on paper. They come to school wanting to learn how to read but knowing that they can write. They are highly motivated to learn to read what other people have written. Capitalizing on their self confidence and using their thoughts and ideas in teaching them to read is also an effective way for them to learn to spell and use standard grammar in the context of creative writing (Graves, 1985).

CONCLUSION

Children do not retain what they do not practice or find relevant in their lives. Learning the essential skills necessary for becoming a reader are only tools and just as owning a hammer and a saw does not make a carpenter, knowing how to read does not make a reader.

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Developing a literate society will not be accomplished simply by teaching "readin, writin, and rithemetic!" It is not enough to develop functional readers. Teachers who recognize the true meaning of literacy will empower their students to use their "basic skills" as a key to unlocking the mysteries of the world to its arcane inhabitants. Literacy is the journey, not the final destination. The aliterate are floating down a river flowing no where in particular. Yes, they can swim, but they prefer to float for they do not know how to steer themselves towards new horizons.

We must provide children the necessary experiences which will push them past the mechanical skills extrinsically imposed into an intrinsic desire to read for pleasure, information, and decision-making. They must be exposed to the aesthetic rewards of reading at an early age by surrounding them with good literature and good role models from the first day they enter a classroom until the day they exit, for the quality of their future depends on it.

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